

Chapter One

Ygris.

Reez sat upright, his heart pounding. His eyes swept the clearing, as he pushed his hair back from his forehead and took a deep breath. Fragmented images from his dreams lingered in his mind of people he had never met and places he had never been. Rubbing his face, he clambered over the roots of the old willow tree that had served as his bed and dipped his hand into the cold water of the stream. Cupping it, he drank the icy liquid as the pictures faded from his memory.

He glanced up at the night sky, noting that dawn wasn't far off. The gibbous moon was hidden behind rolling clouds carrying the threat of rain, but he could see the sky was already growing lighter in the east. The winter cycle was finished, but he still shivered in the predawn twilight.

Resigning himself to another early start, he wandered back to the little hut in the middle of the clearing and, with barely a thought, lit a fire inside the hearth already piled with kindling. The small surge of magic heated the wood to the point where it burst into flames of its own accord before Reez turned his attention to setting the water boiler and making a brew.

He had slept outside the previous evening under the shade of the ancient willow, hoping the familiar embrace of roots and earth would keep the unusual dreams at bay. Unfortunately, it seemed the opposite was true. Reez's connection to the tree and the ground through his plant-self had magnified everything, bringing the images into focus and leaving him restless and yearning for something he didn't even recognise.

The name of Ygris had haunted him for many cycles, ever since he had discovered the box in a cabinet in the Mage library far below his feet. The name was the only clue to its contents; fragments of a familiar green stone that appeared to swirl under the light of the globes embedded in the walls and ceiling. Although the pieces were incomplete, enough remained to fit together like a puzzle, revealing that originally it had been a large sphere, about the size of a person's head, but hollow inside.

He glanced at the Master's ring he wore on his right hand. Every citizen of Zelannor knew of the unique ring only a Master wore. It was proof of his identity and a symbol of his power. The branches and trunk of a full-grown tree were etched onto the same green stone nestled in its gold setting on his finger. That, and the rings from the now long-dead Masters of Bestra and Minra occupying a similar box for safekeeping, were the only other

examples of the stones' kind in the entire country.

The green gem in his ring had always fascinated his sister Amily, now a Master jeweller in her own right. Once, he had idly promised to discover more about its origins from his Master, Wicton, but had never broached the subject and the opportunity to learn more was long gone.

After finding the shards, Reez had sent Amily several smaller pieces of the fragments to see whether she could determine anything about them. He hoped she might shed some light on their construction or origins.

Ygris.

There was one other mention of that name in the library. He had not found it in the thousands of books he had studied, nor on the shelves of the myriad cabinets scattered across the vast floor. A chance glance at one of the lower doors, sealed shut like all the others, had revealed the name carved into the ornately decorated wood among scenes depicting numerous animals, some of which he didn't recognise. The name was in the centre of a triangular shape, the points of which were indented. Its discovery had triggered something in Reez, and his sleep had been disturbed since that time.

At first, the dreams were tentative and quiet, but each time he returned to the Tower of the Mages, they seemed to increase in intensity and urgency until now they invaded his sleep every night. He sighed and rubbed his eyes, feeling every single moment of his thirty-nine summers leach into his bones and muscles that ached and groaned at the lack of sleep.

Sipping a hot cup of kaffe, he leant against the door frame and watched the last of the stars disappear and cloud and daylight move in. At some point the sun might break through above the top of the trees ringing the clearing, but for Reez, the dark staircase and strange illuminations in the library beckoned. He had another puzzle to solve, and he would not return home without an answer. Tipping the dregs of the bitter liquid on the ground, he turned his back on the day, dousing the fire before lifting the entrance stone to the long-hidden archives and descending the winding steps.

It took him a while to source the tome he needed, as the numbering system in the massive vault remained an enigma. He had learnt to trace a subject up or down the tiers if he were fortunate enough to stumble across something interesting, but the ancient system behind the numbers left him bemused. In the last age, it must have made absolute sense for the students using the library, but for Reez, it meant topics and themes were jumbled together.

Although he was now effectively the only wielder of magic in Zelannor, he still had trouble thinking of it as a cohesive unit rather than the three separate disciplines his Master had taught him as a child. Originally schooled only in green magic, Reez had taught himself to manipulate earth and anima magics thanks to his discovery of the Mage library. Although he would likely never be proficient in all the disciplines, he had learnt enough to satisfy the demands of all three provinces. If a need arose, or when his interest was piqued, he simply searched the archives for answers to his questions.

To bring order to this seeming chaos, he had catalogued the books in his own fashion after Verrin's demise and now had a substantial file similar to the one in his own library beneath his home tower at Maston. Each book he studied was recorded with its number, subject and, if possible, its author. He then listed each book in categories to make it easier for him to lay his hand on a relevant treatise. The project had enabled him to bring some structure to the vast amounts of information and to keep track of what he had already studied.

His heart sank as he held the comprehensive book in his hand. The task would not be as simple as he had hoped but would take time and effort to investigate. Opening it, he ran a finger across the intricately detailed anatomical drawing within, grimly determined that no matter how long it took him, he would discover how to repair Destry's ears so she could finally hear. Being a deaf mute had not stopped his wife from developing a complex system of communication using her fingers, so she could now understand conversations when people could sign to her and respond in kind. However, Reez wanted her to be whole and now his spring duties had finished, he had used his time in pursuit of a cure.

He smiled as he pictured her in his mind, wondering what she would be doing. Perhaps she was in the glass house tending to the seedlings, or maybe baking cakes and biscuits in the galley. She may have wandered down to the village to visit her father in Castor's inn or spend time with her sister and nieces. Or, as he suspected, she would be standing in the observatory at the top of the tower, searching the horizon and waiting for her husband to return home. It was a habit of hers when he was absent. She said it was her way of watching over him, keeping him protected by her thoughts and prayers while he was hundreds of miles away from her.

Reez gazed at the thousands upon thousands of books ranged around him. Somewhere in the mass of information lay another book, one that would give him the knowledge he needed to make it possible for them to have a much-longed-for child. It was not unusual for a union to be a barren one. Children were a rich blessing from the First Mage, and one Reez now realised had been manipulated by the Masters of anima magic since the beginning of the age to control the population of all three provinces. Each Master had systematically released plague carriers into the land to spread intricately constructed diseases that often targeted fertile women. His own mother had been gifted with four children before she succumbed to an illness later in life that had left others unharmed. Reez suspected it had been a variety of an engineered disease that had somehow missed her on its first pass.

Now, there were no such restrictions, and the population was already growing. He had spoken to the leaders of all three provinces about adjusting to the change, and they had already agreed on strategies to cope with the projected increase. New settlements were planned or already in existence; the migration of people across the borders was encouraged, and the once strictly delineated provinces were slowly mixing. Farmers from his own province of Fiora had already settled in the south of Bestra specialising in growing many grape varieties to produce wine, and Reez had high hopes his discovery of tin in the coastal areas would become the basis for mining, attracting settlers from Minra in the north.

Thoughts of the metal brought him back to the present. As much as they both wanted a child, he knew their plans would have to wait. Now he needed to travel to Minra and meet with the guild leaders there. Reez tried to visit both Minra and Bestra at least once each cycle to convene with the officials running them in his name. This time, however, he had another reason. He fingered the cryptic note in his pocket and wondered what it could mean. He slipped it out and read it again, as if he could discern more, but the words were short and simple, giving nothing away.

I need to speak to you alone. H.

He frowned and scratched his head before folding the note carefully. What could be so serious that Hobart couldn't, or wouldn't, disclose it in front of the other guild leaders?

After flipping the lever behind the highest door and switching off the library lights, Reez climbed the stone staircase, illuminated by the orange and green lichen found only in deep caves by the sea in the south, and emerged

into the small wooden hut. He carefully folded the furs and linens atop the down-filled mattress and stored them in chests at the foot of the large bed. All the pots had already been washed and arranged on the shelves and the hearth swept clean. He rolled up the thick mats covering the oak floor and laid them on the wooden cot. After a last check to ensure all was in order, he left, shutting the door firmly behind him.

A soft whinny greeted him as he entered the small stable attached to the hut and Reez automatically reached into his pocket for a treat.

“Are you ready for a run, Sugar?” he asked as he offered the apple. Destry had named the stallion after he showed a preference for sweet things. Reez laughed as the horse threw its head up and nickered, eager to be off. He grabbed the reins hanging on a peg by the door and fixed his bags to the horse’s rump before leading him out of the stable and climbing on his back.

“Let’s see how fast you can get me to the mountains, shall we?”

Pressing his heels into Sugar’s flank, he guided him towards the dense hedge of trees and bushes surrounding the clearing. Sensing the call of his blood, which was the key to the opening spell he had performed many cycles ago, the branches parted to let him pass. Once he was through the thicket, the plants shifted together, closing over the small track to form an impenetrable barrier only he could traverse.

He glanced up at the sky, relieved to see the rain clouds rolling towards the east. It was a long ride to Rudesmede. At this point in the cycle, snow would linger on the ground in the north, but having to contend with frequent spring showers would make the journey even more miserable. Clicking his tongue, he pressed his heels into the horse’s flanks and was soon racing across the grassy plain towards Minra.

Chapter Two

Reez reclined in his chair and glanced at the three guild leaders seated on the opposite side of the table before nodding his approval.

“Bestra is already expanding in anticipation of the population growth. We want to be prepared, and the Newtown settlement will certainly ease the pressure in Etheradia and give more options for ships to dock. Who is knowledgeable about harbour construction? We should send a skilled stonemason to oversee the work and advise them.”

“I have someone in mind. He’ll want to visit Etheradia first and speak to the Harbour-master. We must estimate the maximum number of boats needing to dock at any one time. That will dictate how big the artificial harbour needs to be. He’s young but very keen. I’m sure he’ll be an asset,” Hobart said.

“The improved road systems have certainly helped us cope with the increase in demand for stone and metals. It was very foresighted of you to authorise the changes,” Samine said smoothly.

Reez groaned inwardly. It was never a good sign when the head of the Jewellers’ guild was fulsome with his praise. For many cycles, they had danced the same steps as Samine pushed for an increase in gold production and Reez refused his requests, yet he remained as determined as ever. He reminded Reez of the goosegrass seeds that attached themselves to both fabric and fur if anything brushed past them for a moment. They weren’t easily shaken off, and even when you thought you had removed the last one, you would invariably discover more hiding in a crease or clinging to a creature’s belly.

“Before you ask, the answer is no,” Reez said abruptly. “I won’t sanction another gold mine.”

Samine’s unctuous smile froze momentarily. “Nothing was further from my mind,” he continued, his hands spread wide, “however, since you have raised the subject, I do have some figures to present that you might find enlightening.” He pulled a sheaf of papers from his tunic and proffered them. Reez eyed them wearily and took them reluctantly.

“I will look at them, as always, but I won’t be pressured. You know my mind.”

“Of course, Lord.”

As the discussion continued about the recent discovery of the leading stone and how it had proved to be a wonderful tool for navigation, Reez examined Samine closely. He noticed more jewels hanging from both ears than had been there on previous visits, and his clothes were cut from the finest cloth. Reez decided it was past time to make some discrete enquiries into the guild leader’s business dealings. If he discovered Samine had been overcharging his clients again, he would take action. This time he would strip him of his guild title and put another in his place. He had been lenient in the past, unwilling to make radical changes so soon after adding Bestra to his weight of responsibilities, but it appeared Samine had not appreciated the gesture as much as Reez might wish.

The last topic discussed at the meeting was more worrying and swept Reez’s idle thoughts about the guild leader away. Two accounts of jewellers taking samples of their work into Etheradia having been seized by a band of men and the contents of their bags stolen. Understandably upset, the victims demanded that something be done, even proposing that they have armed guards to accompany any visits in the future. There had been infrequent reports of robberies in the past. Unfortunately, however, matters were escalating. Attacks on travellers had become more organised than mere opportunism by desperate men.

Reez scowled. The changes happening in Zelannor were not all good ones, he reflected sadly. With the loss of the strict controls kept in place by the Masters for millennia, malcontents were choosing to follow an easier path than working for a living. Bestra, being the most heavily populated, had already exhibited the baser side of human nature. Fights, robberies, even murder had become a thorny problem in the running of the provinces, and Reez had reluctantly realised he needed to counter it with a force of his own to protect the vulnerable and innocent.

When the meeting finally drew to a close, Reez asked Hobart to remain behind to discuss the Newtown harbour project in more detail and dismissed Jodrel and Samine. He waited until the door leading outside the citadel shut with a quiet thud before turning his attention back to his friend.

Hobart looked older than his fifty summers, Reez realised with a start, as he sat back in his chair. His black beard was striped with grey and he had lost a lot of the hair on his head, his pate shining in the light of the lamps. His shoulders were hunched, as if carrying the weight of the world, and his eyes were dull. Shadows ringed them, obvious even with his dark skin.

When Reez had first met the guild leaders, he had thought Hobart morose and intractable, but over the cycles, the leader of the mason’s guild had proved as solid and dependable as the medium he worked. They had become good friends, even occasionally sharing a glass or two of Taklar, although Reez was careful never to drink too much of it, having suffered mightily from over-imbibing on his first journey north as an apprentice. Despite the long cycles since, Reez still remembered the humiliating episode with chagrin, and he avoided the potent spirit as much as he could.

“You look tired,” Reez said carefully. “What is it that worries you so much you couldn’t write it in a letter?”

Hobart glanced behind at the door leading back down to the town of Rudesmede, as if reassuring himself they were alone. “It may be foolishness, and if so, I apologise. The others advised me not to bother you, but I can’t shake the feeling there is something wrong.”

“Now you have piqued my curiosity,” Reez said with an encouraging smile. He reached for the bottle of berry wine on the large table and refilled both their glasses. “Why don’t you tell me about it?”

Hobart hesitated for a moment before picking up his glass and swallowing a large mouthful. He rubbed his

hand over his bald patch and took a deep breath. “The people in the Far Reaches are reporting issues that concern me. Occasional tremors have been experienced in the mountains for a few cycles, but now the occurrences seem to be stronger and much more frequent. I checked our records and there have never been any entries describing the earth shaking, at least not since the beginning of the age.

“Some of the old mines have collapsed; I went to inspect them for myself. They have long been abandoned, so their loss is not important, and there have been casualties, but as the strength of the tremors grows, the damage becomes more widespread. I am concerned for the inhabitants of the Reaches.

“Then there is the dark cloud,” he continued, glancing at Reez warily. “It was merely a rumour to begin with, more fantasy than anything else, but more and more people reported observing it. So, when I travelled that way, I investigated for myself and I’m ashamed to say it unnerved me.” He paused and glanced up at Reez. “I saw it with my own eyes,” he continued in a quiet voice, “hovering over Magement Peak no matter how strong the wind or from which direction it blows.

“I know we miners are a superstitious lot and see omens and portents everywhere, but this is different. Many people are on edge, including me.” He took another gulp of wine. “The others tell me it is nothing, but it got me thinking. I remembered Chrisos used to journey to the Far Reaches every cycle during the long night. No Master has travelled there for nigh on twenty winters, and it is causing some people to cry of curses, demons or simply plain ill fortune.” He glanced up at Reez again. “I know how it sounds. You’ve every right to dismiss me and tell me not to be so addle-brained.” He slumped back in his seat.

“It does sound a little strange,” Reez conceded, “but I know you, Hobart. You are not given to flights of fancy.”

Hobart looked up, relief in his eyes. “Then, you’ll go to the Reaches?”

Reez sighed and shook his head. “I don’t have the time to travel further north this time. I need to visit Etheradia and meet with the Cardinal before returning to my duties in Fiora.” Hobart’s face fell and Reez felt sorry for his friend.

“Maybe I could investigate later in the cycle. There is likely a simple explanation for both occurrences.”

“No doubt you are right,” Hobart said with a forced smile as he rose. “I’m sorry to lay this on you. I know you are kept busy now you are the only Master in Zelannor.” Reez pushed back his chair and walked around the table. They clasped arms.

“Perhaps, but if you are worried, then I will give it some attention.”

After Hobart left, Reez sighed and stretched. Despite having the guild leaders, Margrave’s, and clerics to run the provinces, the demands on his time were constant. There was always some problem or other needing his personal attention, and he often resented the long absences from home. He was seriously considering having a more permanent structure built in the clearing of the Tower of the Mages and making it his prime residence, so he would be more central and have less distance to travel each time he needed to visit one of the provinces.

He picked up his glass and the almost empty bottle of wine from the table and strolled through the door leading to the main keep. He sighed when he reached the privacy of his study. Pouring out the remaining wine, he settled back in the deep armchair and took a sip, savouring the taste of currants and berries.

He unrolled the sheaf of papers and glanced quickly through the figures before throwing them down in disgust. Samine had become more inventive over the many cycles of Reez’s rule and his calculations more complex, as if he could bamboozle Reez into agreeing to his terms, but the outcome remained constant; Samine

craved more gold.

Despite the dire warnings of the jeweller's guild leader, the economy in all three provinces remained stable. Zelannor was thriving in ways no-one could ever have predicted fifteen cycles ago when Reez had assumed the mantle of Master of Zelannor. Populations were growing, and they had built new settlements in every province. Thanks to several innovations, Reez had not had to expend any more magic to feed the surplus, as the farmers could easily increase their yield to match the extra demand. Hobart's road system had been extended so that a major thoroughfare connected the three principal centres, making travel easier throughout the cycle. Goods could traverse the country quicker, and carts drawn by teams of hinneys were a familiar sight on the roads. Waystations had appeared along all the routes, encouraging travellers to rest, eat, and drink the sometimes-questionable ale, before continuing their travels. The major stops also boasted stables with horses kept ready to be ridden by the Master should he have the need for swift travel across the country.

Recently, a system of Columbines had been utilised to fly to several important locations carrying messages. Now communications were received within a day or two instead of taking a fortnight or more. Although it meant they could quickly apprise Reez of any issues, it also meant the senders expected a speedy response. He was feeling the pressure of such high expectations.

Picking up his glass, he wandered across the room to an enormous map of Minra laid out on a table under the large window. On it, he had transcribed all the mines and seams being worked in the province along with dates and expected yield. Idly, he made a mental note to have a new map drawn up soon, as several seams had been crossed out and he knew of others that would run low within the next few cycles.

His finger traced the now familiar names until he came to the Far Reaches in the province's north. Reez frowned at the lack of mines or settlements in the area. Why would Chrisos have journeyed there each cycle when there was so little to oversee? His eyes scanned to the nearest large town, and he smiled. Stonaven. He hadn't been back there since the destruction of the golden flowers when he was a journeyman. His thoughts became wistful when he recalled that heady moment of a new discovery, only to have it all destroyed with a callous act by an ignorant drunk.

Along with the memory came another of Paiter handing him back his notebook, detailing his find. Reez had asked his friend to keep an eye out for the goldenflower and evidently, he had found it. A single bloom was still pressed between its pages. He had never told Reez the location, having been brutally killed before he had the chance, but Reez remembered him talking about visiting Stonaven. Could the flower have survived somehow and be growing again? Was that where Paiter had found the elusive blossom?

Reez drained his glass. He was intrigued. Perhaps it was simply coincidence that found Paiter journeying in the Reaches, but what if it was not? Chrisos would require his apprentice to understand all of his duties and responsibilities in readiness for taking up the mantle of Master of Minra. Perhaps there was much more to the visit each winter than Reez could fathom. Just in case, he decided he would make time around the long day to go back and inspect the area. Perhaps he would even journey to the remote hillside, the only known site of the goldenflower, to see for himself if the plant had survived Baylen's inferno.

He yawned widely. Although it was still early, he made for his bed. Now his business in Minra was concluded, he needed to travel east and consult with the Cardinal. Determined to make an early start, he kicked off the soft slippers on his feet before pulling off his shirt and trews. Burrowing under the luxurious furs, he closed his eyes and was soon asleep.

Chapter Three

Reez nodded to the three clerics in the familiar red robes as he passed them on the road, their shaved heads and faces lowered as they bowed to him. It had been Jina's idea to send them out into the towns and villages of Bestra, to provide healing and comfort to those who had known loss and fear when Verrin's creatures had roamed the province. Most of the inhabitants had fled their homes in terror as mutilated creatures killed livestock and, occasionally, people before they were all captured and destroyed. Coupled with the atrocities committed by their Master as he fuelled his mad experiments using the life force of children for his magic, the Cardinal felt it would give much needed aid and a way of doing penance for the chapter's perceived sins of compliance and blindness.

With Reez's help, the clerics had learnt much about healing both mind and body and were committed to reaching out to the people rather than expecting them to travel for days with their petitions. It had been so successful both Minra and Fiora had asked for representatives to minister over the borders. Now the clerics roamed the roads and tracks throughout Zelannor as the Cardinal's emissaries. They were also a surprising source of information about the mood of the country and the needs of its inhabitants.

Reez steered his horse into the courtyard of the Waystation and waited while his bags were transferred to a new mount. The owner appeared with bread, cheese and a mug of ale, but Reez barely touched it, preferring to continue his journey with speed. By his reckoning, he could reach Etheradia before nightfall and then he would rest and eat his fill.

As he passed through Bestra, he noted two new settlements being constructed. Although Verrin's creations no longer terrorised the inhabitants, all the newer villages and some of the older ones had built stout walls around the perimeter, a sad legacy and a sign that even after fifteen cycles, the fear had never really gone. Gatekeepers were employed to guard the gates after sundown, only unlocking them if they were reassured those seeking entry meant no harm. Most travellers still preferred to be safely indoors during the time of darkness, but Reez had seen several brave the night in order to travel faster. People returning to their homes were determined they would not be

driven away so easily again. Even the larger farms in the outlying countryside had built secure enclosures to house the animals after dusk, or as defence against any future threats.

Reez arrived at the main stables in good time and after swallowing a glass of cold water, he made his way through the now familiar streets on foot. Despite the lateness of the day, the market remained a hive of activity. Rather than trying to push his way through the crowds, Reez skirted around the edge, his hood pulled up high to hide his face.

Etheradia was very different to his own home in Maston; there he could roam the lanes like any other inhabitant. He was respected but not given any special status, and he liked it that way. In the city, however, if he tried to walk the streets, he was accosted and stopped by everyone. Some had petitions they were desperate for him to hear, others simply wanted to touch him. On one occasion, the street had filled with people kneeling and shouting invocations to him as if he were some kind of deity. He had learnt to keep a low profile and disguise himself when visiting the city.

As he neared one particular alley about halfway around, his eyes were drawn to a makeshift stall that had been erected in the shadows, and he moved closer. In a beaten-up wooden box were dozens of small figures. He picked one out and examined it. It was crude compared to some of the earlier versions, but the figure was recognisable. The creator had even added scarring on the side of the rough face. The right arm was raised high, and in its palm was a green stone. This one was not a jewel but glass with a green colouring behind it.

"It's a powerful ward against disease and evil spirits," a young lad said as he appeared from the shadows, his tunic and trows stained and worn. He had no shoes on his feet. "Take two and you can have one at home and one when you travel."

"Did you make these?" Reez asked carefully. At first, the boy looked as if he were going to take credit for the figures, but eventually shook his head. "But the maker is here? I'd like to meet them."

"He doesn't like visitors," the boy mumbled, suddenly uncertain. His eyes flitted down the alley.

"You know these things have been forbidden," Reez said. Suddenly, the boy took to his heels and ran. Reez watched as he disappeared into the swell of people before turning back to the stall. He rotted the wooden figurines and watched them collapse into a useless heap, mentally adding it to the list of things he would need to discuss with Jina.

After he became Master of Bestra, icons and talismans had flourished. People had worshipped the Eternal One and despite his attempts to dissuade them, the populace had substituted one idol for another. Effigies of him appeared on the streets, many of them beautiful representations with gemstones of jade and emerald. It was thought the more expensive the figure, the greater the blessings it bestowed. When logic and common sense failed to stop the practice, they had resorted to banning it altogether. However, it seemed the practice was re-emerging.

Resuming his journey, Reez finally reached the street he was making for. Taking two small keys from the chain around his neck, Reez unlocked the door to his home in the city and closed it with a sigh.

Once a bustling inn, the Falcon was now his residence when he visited Etheradia. The previous owners had settled in his own village of Maston and, despite the death of Verrin, had elected to stay and run the inn where they had found sanctuary and friendship, making it their new home.

Reez headed to the cellar, grateful that the wine had been restocked, and perused the racks while he waited. He finally chose a bottle from the new vineyards in the southeast. Returning to the taproom, he poured out two glasses. He was appreciating the dry vintage when the door opened, and a young man slipped inside carrying a

basket. Reez sniffed in appreciation as the aromas of spiced meat and fresh bread filled the room and his mouth watered in anticipation.

The man dropped into the seat opposite and unpacked the food. Dressed in a brown homespun tunic and trews and wearing thick boots, he would blend easily into the crowds that thronged Etheradia's streets and alleys. A close look at his face, however, would cause even the most reckless to pause. A wicked scar ran across one eye, a legacy of a knife fight, giving him an aura of danger. His body, although at first glance relaxed, was tightly coiled and ready to spring into action at a moment's notice, honed from many cycles of living in the darker parts of the city. His brown hair was cropped short and his dark eyes roamed around the taproom as he worked, constantly alert. Reez glanced out of the window and noticed two brutish men lounging against the wall opposite the inn, keeping watch.

"How is business?" Reez asked as he pushed one of the glasses across the table. He pulled off a heel of bread and slathered it with the creamy butter.

"Do you really want to know?" the man said. A smile crossed his features and softened his face, reminding Reez of the boy he had first met.

"Perhaps not," Reez conceded. "You know I wish you would leave that world behind, Trane."

"Why would I? I have more influence than you can imagine. Besides, if I suddenly became respectable, where would you get your information from?"

Reez shook his head slightly. Trane had worked his way up the ranks of the underworld community until they had finally appointed him Prime, when the previous holder of the title had retired and moved south to warmer climes. Although he had stopped the worst of the criminal endeavours in the city and had even gained some repute for his regulated gaming houses and brothels, Trane was still involved in illicit activities, as well as controlling a vast network of spies and informants.

"Speaking of information, I had a disturbing report of jewellery being taken from sellers travelling here from Minra. Do you know anything about it?"

"Not my crew," Trane said vehemently.

"But you know who is behind it," Reez pressed.

"It could be Porlan and his cronies," Trane said after a moment, absently rubbing the scar across his eye. "After his attempted coup, I exiled him. Some of his friends went with him. I expect they've decided the gold and gems coming from the north are better pickings than a few coins from poor wanderers."

"Where can I find him?"

"I'll make some enquiries and get back to you."

Reez sat back, observing Trane closely. "You need to know I am thinking of creating some kind of militia. These occurrences are happening more frequently than I would like. I can't be everywhere, and the people should be protected from harm."

Trane nodded. "Consider me warned."

Reez paused for a moment and then decided to change the subject. "I didn't recognise the boy when I came past. Is Dorrick well?"

"He's grown too much to keep watch on this place. I moved him to other duties. The one you saw is Tymer, a new recruit. He came to the city from Wetheron after his Pa beat him one too many times. I caught him trying to pick my purse. He hadn't eaten in days and was desperate, so I took him under my wing."

“You can’t take in every stray child that comes here, you know.”

Trane shrugged. “I don’t keep them all. I take a lot of them to the Abbey.”

Reez stopped eating and stared in surprise. “I remember you swearing you would have nothing to do with the clerics or the island again.”

Trane flushed slightly and stared out of the window. “Things change,” he said slowly. “I watched them for a long time. I even had a boat ferry me over so I could spy on the acolytes myself. I thought to catch the clerics in their lies and call them out, but Jina told me the truth. The children are cared for and educated. They even have a choice to either join the priesthood, or be apprenticed out to learn a trade.” He paused for a moment. “Have you ever been back to the far side of the island?” he asked, looking across at Reez, who shook his head.

“Jina had a stone raised and piled the broken and rusted shackles around it. He planted trees and flowers where the sheds once stood and put seats in the shade. The children can sit and learn about its history, or relax and enjoy the garden. There are chimes in the trees that sing when the wind blows. Jina says the sound is to replace the cries of the victims. It’s a very peaceful place.” He sat in silence for a moment. Reez couldn’t help comparing the dirty little orphan he had rescued from the fetid sheds, where all Verrin’s captives were kept imprisoned, to the powerful man now seated opposite him.

“Anyway,” Trane continued, “I talked to those who are living there and found out they are truly happy. My life doesn’t suit everyone. Those who wouldn’t survive or seek an honest future, I take them to Jina.”

“I’m glad you stayed in touch with him.”

“For a cleric, he’s pretty decent. Jina’s getting old, you know,” Trane said. “I think this role has taken a heavy toll on him.”

“He’s worked extremely hard,” Reez agreed. “I couldn’t have picked a better Cardinal.”

“Well, I think you need to choose another one,” Trane said bluntly.

Reez frowned. “Why? Do the people not like him?”

“The people respect him, maybe even love him, but he loathes that Abbey. He hates keeping the chapter in line and overseeing everything. He loses sleep, worrying that things might revert somehow, or if he drops his guard, the cruelty will return. I think he’d be happier joining the lower clerics on pilgrimage and working in the villages.”

“He told you this?” Reez asked, his eyebrows rising.

Trane shook his head. “Not in so many words, but I listen, and I watch. I can fill in the gaps.”

“He’s mentioned nothing like that to me.”

Trane snorted. “Why would he? You’re the Master. He would never question you or put his needs before yours. If you want him to continue until he dies, he would. He’d never utter a word of complaint.”

Reez sat back and wiped his hands on a linen napkin. “I’ll speak to him.”

Trane nodded once and refilled their glasses. “I have more bad news. There is a problem in Newtown.”

“Already?” Reez thought back to the discussions he’d had with the guild leaders. They had mentioned no issues. “What problem? I’ve heard nothing.”

“Raiders. Possibly the slavers who used to treat with the Infernal One, may be rot forever. A few folk have disappeared and black sails have been sighted.”

“And you know this? How?” Reez asked with a frown.

“I have contacts there. When it was clear Newtown was going to be a major trading post, I sent some of my crew to monitor things.”

Reez shook his head slightly and closed his eyes. "You control the underworld there, you mean."

"If you like. Seemed like an opportunity to expand my business dealings."

Reez smiled ruefully. "I don't suppose your little empire stretches across the border, does it?"

Trane grinned. "Not yet, but I'm an ambitious person."

"I don't know whether to shake your hand or haul you off in chains."

Trane laughed. "Do neither. Drink a toast with me: to successful enterprises." They both lifted their glasses and sipped the wine.

"This is good," Trane said, licking his lips appreciatively. "I'm glad they only give you the very best of everything."

"One advantage of my position, I suppose."

"Master of all magics," Trane said in admiration. "No-one in the history of the age can match you. I'm glad we're friends. You are the only person in the world I truly fear."

"Why would you fear me?" Reez asked in puzzlement. "When have I ever given you cause?"

"Never. But I know I wouldn't stand a chance if you turned against me. Anyone who can defeat a Master and emerge unscathed is a force to be reckoned with."

"That was more luck than judgement," Reez admitted wryly. "If Verrin's source of magic hadn't died, I wouldn't be here now, and Zelannor would be very different."

Trane shrugged. "I'm not a religious man, but it seems to me someone else is watching out for you, beside me, of course."

"I would like to think so," Reez said quietly. "I need all the help I can get."

"What is it like to be the ruler of such a vast empire?"

Reez snorted. "Tiring," he said with a sigh. "Despite my best efforts, people still can't seem to make a decision before running it past me first. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to leave it all behind." He stared wistfully out of the window. "I once contemplated taking passage on one of the ships travelling across the Eternal Sea. I would like to have seen the lands beyond these shores. Now, I have too much to do."

"I understand," Trane said quietly. "When I was younger, I imagined the Prime would live a life of leisure, but the reality is much different. I'm usually embroiled in some matter or other the Seconds can't handle alone. I can't trust many people, so I must be constantly on my guard. Attempted assassinations tend to keep you on your toes," he admitted with a grin.

Reez glanced up at Trane's eye. "You never told me what happened to the man who attacked you," he said.

"Trust me. You really don't want to know."

"You know, if you had taken up my offer and trained with Jina, I might be considering you for the role of Cardinal now." Trane looked at him with horror, and Reez laughed. "On second thoughts, I'm not sure I would want you wielding so much power. You're far too resourceful as it is."

Trane lifted his glass. "Now I think on it, perhaps the notion has merit," he said, pretending to consider the idea. "Keep me in mind as a candidate. Let us toast the merging of roles and a new Prime Cardinal."

"I'll pass on that, thank you." Grinning, Reez raised his glass and gulped back the contents.

Trane belched loudly. "I'm done," he said with a satisfied smile. He rose and piled the remains of their meal back into the basket. "So, will you be travelling to Newtown after seeing Jina?"

“It looks as though I’ll have to. Although I want to return home to Destry, if slavers are responsible, they need to be dealt with first.”

“In that case, I’ll send word to my colleague. They’ll contact you if there is anymore news.” Trane saluted Reez with a grin before slipping through the door.

“Colleague,” Reez muttered to himself as he watched Trane’s bodyguards follow their Prime down the alley and disappear. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. As much as he admired and respected Trane, it was wrong to allow criminals to police the province. His friend had been fortunate so far, but one day someone could get too close and leave him with more than just a scar. The next Prime would likely be unsympathetic to the wishes of a Master and end up sanctioning all kinds of nefarious schemes. He would talk to Jina, and put some concrete plans in place towards establishing a formal militia to keep order and deal with wrongdoers.

His thoughts turned to the missing people in Newtown. Yet another problem needing to be solved.

“I’m sorry, my love,” he whispered. It would be a long while before he would be free to return home. Feeling melancholy, he refilled his glass before making his way up the stairs to his bed.